



## Transparencies on Film

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# *Transparencies on Film\**

by Theodor W. Adorno

Children when teasing each other in their squabbles, follow the rule: no fair copycat. Their wisdom seems to be lost on the all too thoroughly grown-up adults. The Oberhauseners attacked the nearly sixty-year old trash production of the film industry with the epithet: "Daddy's Cinema." Representatives of the latter in turn could come up with no better retort than "Kiddy's Cinema." This cat, as once again the saying goes among children, does not copy. How pathetic to pit experience against immaturity when the issue is the very immaturity of that experience acquired during the adolescence of the medium. What is repulsive about Daddy's Cinema is its infantile character, regression manufactured on an industrial scale. The sophistry of the defenders insists on the very type of achievement the concept of which is challenged by the opposition. However, even if there were something to that reproach — if films that did not play along with business really were in some ways clumsier than the latter's smoothly polished wares — then the triumph would be pitiful. It would only demonstrate that those supported by the power of capital, technological routine and highly trained specialists could do better in some respects than those who rebel against the colossus and thus must necessarily forego the advantages of its accumulated potential. In this comparatively awkward and unprofessional cinema, uncertain of its effects, is inscribed the hope that the so-called mass media might eventually become something qualitatively different. While in autonomous art anything lagging behind the already established technical standard does not rate, vis-à-vis the culture industry — whose standard excludes everything but the predigested and the already integrated, just as the cosmetic trade eliminates facial wrinkles — works which have not completely mastered their technique, conveying as a result something consolingly uncontrolled and accidental, have a liberating quality. In them the flaws of a pretty girl's complexion become the corrective to the immaculate face of the professional star.

It is known that in the Törless film<sup>1</sup> large segments of Musil's early novel

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1. *Der junge Törless* (1965/66), a film by Volker Schlöndorff, based on Robert Musil, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless* (translator's footnote).

were incorporated into the dialogue almost unchanged. They are considered superior to the lines by the scriptwriters, which no living person would ever utter, and which in the meantime have been ridiculed by American critics. In their own way, however, Musil's sentences also tend to sound artificial as soon as they are heard, not read. This may be to some extent the fault of the novel which incorporates a type of rationalistic casuistry into the internal movement of its text under the guise of a psychology that the more progressive Freudian psychology of the period exposed as a rationalization. Nevertheless, this is hardly the whole point. The artistic difference between the media is obviously still greater than expected by those who feel able to avoid bad prose by adapting good prose. Even when dialogue is used in a novel, the spoken word is not directly spoken but is rather distanced by the act of narration — perhaps even by the typography — and thereby abstracted from the physical presence of living persons. Thus, fictional characters never resemble their empirical counterparts no matter how minutely they are described. In fact, it may be due to the very precision of their presentation that they are removed even further from empirical reality; they become aesthetically autonomous. Such distance is abolished in film: to the extent that a film is realistic, the semblance of immediacy cannot be avoided. As a result, phrases justified by the diction of narrative which distinguishes them from the false everydayness of mere reportage, sound pompous and inauthentic in film. Film, therefore, must search for other means of conveying immediacy: improvisation which systematically surrenders itself to unguided chance should rank high among possible alternatives.

The late emergence of film makes it difficult to distinguish between technique and technology as clearly as is possible in music. In music up to the electronic period, the intrinsic technique — the sound structure of the work — was distinct from its performance, the means of reproduction. Film suggests the equation of technique and technology since, as Benjamin observed, the cinema has no original which is then reproduced on a mass scale: the mass product is the thing itself. This equation, however, is problematic, in film as well as in music. Experts in cinematographic techniques refer to the fact that Chaplin was either unaware of or purposely ignored these techniques, being content with the photographic rendering of sketches, slapstick routines or other performances. This in no way lowers Chaplin's status and one can hardly doubt that he was 'filmic.' Nowhere but on the screen could this enigmatic figure — reminiscent of old-fashioned photographs right from the start — have developed its concept. As a consequence, it appears impossible to derive norms of criticism from cinematographic technique as such. The most plausible theory of film technique, that which focuses on the movement of objects,<sup>2</sup> is both provocatively denied and yet preserved, in negative form,

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2. Cf. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 41 ff.

in the static character of films like Antonioni's *La Notte*. Whatever is 'uncinematic' in this film gives it the power to express, as if with hollow eyes, the emptiness of time. Irrespective of the technological origins of the cinema, the aesthetics of film will do better to base itself on a subjective mode of experience which film resembles and which constitutes its artistic character. A person who, after a year in the city, spends a few weeks in the mountains abstaining from all work, may unexpectedly experience colorful images of landscapes consolingly coming over him or her in dreams or daydreams. These images do not merge into one another in a continuous flow, but are rather set off against each other in the course of their appearance, much like the magic lantern slides of our childhood. It is in the discontinuity of their movement that the images of the interior monologue resemble the phenomenon of writing: the latter similarly moving before our eyes while fixed in its discrete signs. Such movement of interior images may be to film what the visible world is to painting or the acoustic world to music. As the objectifying recreation of this type of experience, film may become art. The technological medium *par excellence* is thus intimately related to the beauty of nature (*tief verwandt dem Naturschönen*).

If one decides to take the self-censors more or less literally and confront films with the context of their reception, one will have to proceed more subtly than those traditional content analyses which, by necessity, relied primarily on the intentions of a film and neglected the potential gap between such intentions and their actual effect. This gap, however, is inherent in the medium. If according to the analysis of "Television as Ideology"<sup>3</sup> film accommodates various layers of behavioral response patterns, this would imply that the ideology provided by the industry, its officially intended models, may by no means automatically correspond to those that affect the spectators. If empirical communications research were finally to look for problems which could lead to some results, this one would merit priority. Overlapping the official models are a number of unofficial ones which supply the attraction yet are intended to be neutralized by the former. In order to capture the consumers and provide them with substitute satisfaction, the unofficial, if you will, heterodox ideology must be depicted in a much broader and juicier fashion than suits the moral of the story; the tabloid newspapers furnish weekly examples of such excess. One would expect the public's libido, repressed by a variety of taboos, to respond all the more promptly since these behavioral patterns, by the very fact that they are allowed to pass, reflect an element of collective approval. While intention is always directed against the playboy, the *dolce vita* and wild parties, the opportunity to behold them

3. T. W. Adorno, "Fernsehen als Ideologie," in *Eingriffe: Neun Kritische Modelle* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1936), pp. 81-98. Based on an English-language original: "How to Look at Television," *The Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. VII (Spring 1954), pp. 213-235, reprinted as "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture," in: B. Rosenberg and D. Manning White, eds. *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (New York: Free Press, 1957), pp. 474-488 (translator's footnote).

seems to be relished more than the hasty verdict. If today you can see in Germany, in Prague, even in conservative Switzerland and in Catholic Rome, everywhere, boys and girls crossing the streets locked in each others arms and kissing each other unembarrassed, then they have learned this, and probably more, from the films which peddle Parisian libertinage as folklore. In its attempts to manipulate the masses the ideology of the culture industry itself becomes as internally antagonistic as the very society which it aims to control. The ideology of the culture industry contains the antidote to its own lie. No other plea could be made for its defense.

The photographic process of film, primarily representational, places a higher intrinsic significance on the object, as foreign to subjectivity, than aesthetically autonomous techniques; this is the retarding aspect of film in the historical process of art. Even where film dissolves and modifies its objects as much as it can, the disintegration is never complete. Consequently, it does not permit absolute construction: its elements, however abstract, always retain something representational; they are never purely aesthetic values. Due to this difference, society projects into film quite differently — far more directly on account of the objects — than into advanced painting or literature. That which is irreducible about the objects in film is itself a mark of society, prior to the aesthetic realization of an intention. By virtue of this relationship to the object, the aesthetics of film is thus inherently concerned with society. There can be no aesthetics of the cinema, not even a purely technological one, which would not include the sociology of the cinema. Kracauer's theory of film which practices sociological abstention compels us to consider that which is left out in his book; otherwise antiformalism turns into formalism. Kracauer ironically plays with the resolve of his earliest youth to celebrate film as the discoverer of the beauties of daily life: such a program, however, was a program of *Jugendstil* just as all those films which attempt to let wandering clouds and murky ponds speak for themselves are relics of *Jugendstil*. By choosing objects presumably cleansed of subjective meaning, these films infuse the object with exactly that meaning which they are trying to resist.

Benjamin did not elaborate on how deeply some of the categories he postulated for film — exhibition, test — are imbricated with the commodity character which his theory opposes. The reactionary nature of any realist aesthetic today is inseparable from this commodity character. Tending to reinforce, affirmatively, the phenomenal surface of society, realism dismisses any attempt to penetrate that surface as a romantic endeavor. Every meaning — including critical meaning — which the camera eye imparts to the film would already invalidate the law of the camera and thus violate Benjamin's taboo, conceived as it was with the explicit purpose of outdoing the provocative Brecht and thereby — this may have been its secret purpose — gaining freedom from him. Film is faced with the dilemma of finding a

procedure which neither lapses into arts-and-crafts nor slips into a mere documentary mode. The obvious answer today, as forty years ago, is that of montage which does not interfere with things but rather arranges them in a constellation akin to that of writing. The viability of a procedure based on the principle of shock, however, raises doubts. Pure montage, without the addition of intentionality in its elements, does not derive intention merely from the principle itself. It seems illusory to claim that through the renunciation of all meaning, especially the cinematically inherent renunciation of psychology, meaning will emerge from the reproduced material itself. It may be, however, that the entire issue is rendered obsolete by the insight that the refusal to interpret, to add subjective ingredients, is in itself a subjective act and as such *a priori* significant. The individual subject who remains silent speaks not less but more through silence than when speaking aloud. Those filmmakers ostracized for being too intellectual should, by way of revision, absorb this insight into their working methods. Nonetheless, the gap between the most progressive tendencies in the visual arts and those of film continues to exist, compromising the latter's most radical intentions. For the time being, evidently, film's most promising potential lies in its interaction with other media, themselves merging into film, such as certain kinds of music. One of the most powerful examples of such interaction is the television film *Antithèse*<sup>4</sup> by composer Mauricio Kagel.

That, among its functions, film provides models for collective behavior is not just an additional imposition of ideology. Such collectivity, rather, inheres in the innermost elements of film. The movements which the film presents are mimetic impulses which, prior to all content and meaning, incite the viewers and listeners to fall into step as if in a parade. In this respect, film resembles music just as, in the early days of radio, music resembled film strips. It would not be incorrect to describe the constitutive subject of film as a "we" in which the aesthetic and sociological aspects of the medium converge. *Anything Goes*<sup>5</sup> was the title of a film from the thirties with the popular English actress Gracie Fields; this 'anything' captures the very substance of film's formal movement, prior to all content. As the eye is carried along, it joins the current of all those who are responding to the same appeal. The indeterminate nature of this collective "anything" (*Es*), however, which is linked to the formal character of film facilitates the ideological misuse of the medium: the pseudo-revolutionary blurring in which the phrase "things must change" is conveyed by the gesture of banging one's fist on the table. The liberated film would have to wrest its *a priori* collectivity from the mechanisms of unconscious and

4. *Antithèse: Film for one performer with electronic and everyday sounds* (1965); first broadcast April 1, 1966 by NDR III, Hamburg (translator's footnote).

5. *Anything Goes* (1936; Paramount), dir. Lewis Milestone, with Bing Crosby, Ethel Merman, Grace Bradley (*sic!*) and others; songs by Cole Porter (translator's footnote).

irrational influence and enlist this collectivity in the service of emancipatory intentions.

Film technology has developed a series of techniques which work against the realism inherent in the photographic process. Among these are soft-focus shots — a long outdated arty custom in photography — superimpositions, and also, frequently, flashbacks. It is about time to recognize the ludicrousness of such effects and get rid of them because these techniques are not grounded in the necessities of individual works but in mere convention; they inform the viewer as to what is being signified or what needs to be added in order to comprehend whatever escapes basic cinematic realism. Since these techniques almost always contain some expressive — even if commonplace — values of their own, a discrepancy arises between expression and conventional sign. This is what gives these inserts the appearance of *kitsch*. Whether it creates the same effect in the context of montage and extradiegetic associations has yet to be examined. In any case, such cinematographic divagations require particular tact on the part of the film-maker. The lesson to be learned from this phenomenon is dialectical: technology in isolation, which disregards the nature of film as language, may end up in contradiction to its own internal logic. Emancipated film production should no longer depend uncritically upon technology (i.e. the mere equipment of its profession) in the manner of a by no means still ‘new objectivity’ (*einer keineswegs mehr neuen Sachlichkeit*). In commercial film production, however, the aesthetic logic inherent in the material is caught in a stage of crisis even before it is given a chance to really unfold. The demand for a meaningful relationship between technique, material and content does not mix well with the fetishism of means.

It is undeniable that Daddy’s Cinema indeed corresponds to what the consumers want, or, perhaps, rather that it provides them with an unconscious canon of what they do not want, that is, something different from what they are presently being fed. Otherwise, the culture industry could not have become a mass culture. The identity of these two phenomena, however, is not so beyond doubt as critical thought assumes as long as it focuses on the aspect of production and refrains from empirical analyses of reception. Nevertheless, the favorite argument of the whole- and half-hearted apologists, that culture industry is the art of the consumer, is untrue; it is the ideology of ideology. Even the reductive equation of the culture industry with the low art of all ages does not hold up. The culture industry contains an element of rationality — the calculated reproduction of the low — which, while certainly not missing in the low art of the past, was not its rationale. Moreover, the venerable roughness and idiocy of such hybrids of *circenses* and burlesque so popular during the late Roman empire do not justify the revival of such phenomena after they have become aesthetically and socially transparent. Even if considered apart

from its historical perspective, the validity of the argument for consumer-oriented art can be attacked in the very present. Its proponents depict the relationship between art and its reception as static and harmonious, according to the principle of supply and demand, in itself a dubious model. Art unrelated to the objective spirit of its time is equally unimaginable as art without the moment which transcends it. The separation from empirical reality which pertains to the constitution of art from the outset requires precisely that moment. The conformity to the consumer, on the contrary, which likes to masquerade as humanitarianism, is nothing but the economic technique of consumer exploitation. Artistically, it means the renunciation of all interference with the syrupy substance of the current idiom and, as a result, with the reified consciousness of the audience. By reproducing the latter with hypocritical subservience, the culture industry changes this reified consciousness all the more, that is, for its own purposes: it actually prevents that consciousness from changing on its own, as it secretly and, deep down, unadmittedly desires. The consumers are made to remain what they are: consumers. That is why the culture industry is not the art of the consumer but rather the projection of the will of those in control onto their victims. The automatic self-reproduction of the status quo in its established forms is itself an expression of domination.

One will have observed that it is difficult, initially, to distinguish the preview of a 'coming attraction' from the main film for which one is waiting. This may tell us something about the main attractions. Like the previews and like the pop hits, they are advertisements for themselves, bearing the commodity character like a mark of Cain on their foreheads. Every commercial film is actually only the preview of that which it promises and will never deliver.

How nice it would be if, under the present circumstances, one could claim that the less films appear to be works of art, the more they would be just that. One is especially drawn to this conclusion in reaction to those snobbish psychological class-A pictures which the culture industry forces itself to make for the sake of cultural legitimization. Even so, one must guard against taking such optimism too far: the standardized Westerns and thrillers — to say nothing of the products of German humor and the patriotic tear-jerkers (*Heimatschnulze*)—are even worse than the official hits. In integrated culture one cannot even depend on the dregs.

*Translated by Thomas Y. Levin*